

FORMAN BROS
THRASHING & TRANSPORT CONTRACTORS
BRANSTON LINCOLN



**A Presentational Talk by Gerald Forman,
Given to Branston History Group on
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On Tuesday 20th March 2012 Gerald Forman gave a very interesting and informative talk to a very large attendance concerning the family business which operated from the village for a total of 95 years. He was ably assisted by family members and his talk was accompanied by some excellent photographs prepared by his son Paul and grandson Christopher.

BRANSTON HISTORY GROUP—TUESDAY 20TH MARCH 2012

In giving this presentation I realise that because it concerns so much local history it is likely to bring some worms out of the woodwork, or mimic the title of Charles Dickens novels 'Great Expectations' or 'The Old Curiosity Shop' or even Shakespeare's 'Much Ado About Nothing'.

Before I commence however I would like to sincerely thank all my immediate family, also my nephew John, Heather Elkington, Janet Eggleton and John Millns, for all the help they have given me in researching the subject and preparing the exhibits for showing.

The name Forman denotes a very old Lincolnshire family which originated in Toynton-St-Peter, a small village near Spilsby. Our ancestry can be traced back through church records to 1590 but before that time it is very sketchy to be almost non-existent. There were many branches of the family at this time with many children. Some settled locally and some went to other parts of the country, while others made the hazardous journey to the U.S.A., a journey on which some of them perished. Those that arrived safely settled in Michigan and Ohio.

My grandfather, the founder of the business, was born in 1863 and was the eldest of a family of six children. As was customary the eldest son of the family was given the family Christian names of William Watson. Here I have a problem because I have no knowledge of how or when he arrived in the village of Branston. I can only assume his work brought him here and he may have been employed by Thomas Kettleborough. In 1891 he married Ellen Berridge the eldest of a family on nine girls and two boys. The Berridge family were family butchers trading at 143 Newark Road, Lincoln. The family took up residence at 39 High Street, Branston, and from this union five children were subsequently born. As was customary the eldest son was given the family names of William Watson, born 1893, Harold, my father, born 1898, a daughter May who married a man who was the Chief Executive of the Blaze Allots' business in Lincoln. The two other children died at a very young age, certainly before 1911 and I am not aware of their gender.

In the Census of 1891 my grandfather was recorded as being a Traction Engine Driver, and on the 9th October 1897 he purchased from Thomas Kettleborough a 7 h.p. Ransome thrashing engine for the sum of £145, paying £50 down and the balance of £95 later. The Census of 1891 also records that Thomas Kettleborough was a farmer and thrashing machine owner residing at 27 High Street, Branston, 63 years of age and a widower. The Census of 1910 recorded him as a retired farmer, etc. residing on the south side of Sleaford Road, Branston. From that information it is assumed that my grandfather worked for Thomas Kettleborough, possibly on a self-employed basis and bought the engine from him when he retired. The same Census records grandfather as a Road Locomotive Machine Owner and Employer.

In 1904 the family moved and rented Stonefield House on Sleaford Road, Branston. This was an extensive development which included some attached buildings and nearby stables, together with land that was being used as a quarry but which was later filled in. This

became the base for the operation of the business, the telephone number being 14. Stonefield House was owned and built by Thomas Lovelee, a Corn Miller, Stonemason, and Lime Burner by trade. The house, locally known as the Monkey House, was recorded as a 'folly' and this fact is published in a book. (Title not known.)

The two brothers had a basic education at the village school and on leaving they both went to work for their father in the business. In the Census for 1911 it records William Watson Junior working as a traction Engine Driver with his father, and also records a Walter Richardson, aged 20 years, a lodger at Stonefield House working as a thrashing machine feeder. At this time Harold (my father) was still at school, but when he subsequently left and joined the business it is believed there were two thrashing machine outfits in use.

My father being the younger of the two sons was eligible for military service in World War 1 and after enlistment he served in France driving a steam engine vehicle. Throughout the rest of his life he never ever spoke of his experiences in France and it can only be presumed he never wanted to recall the horrors he had witnessed. His older brother had been allowed to remain at home to take care of the business. At some time during 1917/18 my grandfather purchased Stonefield House and at the end of the war when my father returned to the family business he took over his father's engine. It is not known if at this time grandfather was a sick man or not but his time as lord and master was short lived for he died in 1920 at just 57 years of age. None of my generation had the pleasure of knowing him, however I believe the man on the thrashing machine in one of the photos is my grandfather.

After grandfather's death his two sons, William Watson and Harold, formed a partnership and the firm of Forman Bros. was born. Two young men aged 27 and 22 years, who were about to forge their way in the world, and the business just took off. They rapidly expanded the company by building two storey offices which were attached to an existing building in which they had installed a Ruston & Hornsby 5 HE 20 h.p. diesel engine together with a Higgs generator, thus providing their own electricity supply. This served them well until the introduction of fluorescent lighting which could not run on Direct Current, but the generator was still used for welding work. A large wooden building was purchased from R.A.F. Scampton and transported to Branston where it was erected on the premises. This building housed the blacksmiths and joiners shop, a large section of it housed machinery consisting of 2 lathes, 1 shaping machine, 1 power saw, 1 drill, 1 grindstone, 1 welder, a water pump, and a 150 ton tyre press which was for the removal and fitting of solid tyres. This press was the only one around and the firm became suppliers and fitters of solid tyres to many other firms. All this machinery was operated by a single electric motor connected to a shaft to which each machine was individually attached, an archaic system by today's standards but just the norm at that time. The remainder of the building consisted of parking bays. This building was known as the Black Shed and all repair work was done on site, even the re-tubing of steam boilers.

Both of the brothers married in the 1920s, William Watson and his wife going to live in the first house in Silver Street opposite the war memorial. They had three children, namely William, Frank, and Ralph who was an invalid. Harold, my father, married the village school teacher, a Miss Edith Roden and they went to live in Parkside. They also had three children, namely Olive, Gerald (that's me), and Pamela.

In 1926 they introduced steam road haulage vehicles into the business to run in conjunction with the thrashing business. They purchased a total of six vehicles;

One Clayton Shuttleworth Overtyp, 2nd hand, 1926.

One Robey & Doughty & Richardson.

Two new Clayton Undertype, 1927.

One Clayton Overtyp, 1928, and lastly in 1929

A Super Sentinel DG6 Undertype, 3 axle unit with electric lights.

These steam powered vehicles were constantly in use for the haulage of goods and materials, one of the most significant operations being the carrying of thousands of tons of aggregate from Burton Pit to Cranwell for the building of Cranwell College, during which each loaded vehicle had to climb Burton Hill.

The Sentinel was manufactured in Shrewsbury and was recognised as the finest steam road haulage vehicle in the world and was capable of carrying an 8ton load up a gradient of 1 in 7. This vehicle only worked for the company for four years as penal taxation among other issues introduced by the government in 1930/33 was the death knell for steam haulage vehicles. Thus began the process of replacing them with vehicles powered by internal combustion engines.

The company was a member of the National Traction Engine Owners & Users' Association and in 1932 became a member of the first Road Haulage Association. In addition they were commercial members of the Automobile Association and this enabled messages to be passed to drivers by the A.A. patrols. My father Harold always knew where any particular driver should be and he would pass the message, approximate location, and registered number of the vehicle to the A.A. office, which in turn would pass the details to the patrolman for him to stop the vehicle and deliver the message to the driver. If necessary the drivers could also contact the office by telephone as there was a public telephone kiosk to be found in almost every village they passed through. None of the drivers were keen to use the A15 road between Lincoln and Sleaford though because there were no public telephone kiosks on that route. The company never used any advertising methods as they believed that their vehicles with their distinctive livery were sufficient for the company to become well known.

Prior to 1930 there was no legislation or regulation of road transport or passenger transport. Men returning home after WW 1 seized this opportunity to start in business on their own account by obtaining and operating vehicles for the distribution of goods. No doubt Forman Bros joined in the stampede and the road haulage industry grew rapidly. Industry soon took up the advantage of having

a door to door service which was available at short notice and generally cheaper than rail, this led to full loads going by road and part loads and small items being left to go by rail. This free for all resulted in legislation and regulation. The 1930 Road Traffic Act was mainly relevant to the passenger side of the industry where compulsory third party insurance was introduced. The road haulage side had to contend with Construction and Use Regulations which set out the number of persons required to drive and attend the vehicles.

The 1933 Road and Rail Traffic Act was introduced with the object of controlling the conditions under which goods should be carried by road to prevent unfair and wasteful competition among operators. This was achieved by the introduction of a 'Carriers Licensing' system whereby vehicles were issued with a lettered disc A - B - C which had to be displayed on the vehicle.

'A' Licence - was open-ended and was valid for 5 years. Was very much prized.

'A' Contract Licence - Tied to one customer.

'B' Licence - Restricted in respect of distance and goods carried. Valid for 2 years.

'C' Licence - Restricted to manufacturers own goods.

To achieve all of this the country was divided into eleven areas on county boundaries, each with a Licensing Authority. Lincolnshire became part of the 'East Midlands Licensing Authority', which was comprised of Lincs - Notts - Derby - Leics - Rutland - Northants - Bucks - Oxfordshire. Existing operators, provided they made their applications within the specified time, were all granted 'A' Licences.

After the initial grants had been made to existing operators, all subsequent applications were published under the heading 'Applications & Decisions' a publication issued by the Traffic Commission at Nottingham, and were open to objection from existing road and rail operators. Should objections be received to an application, and you could count on the railway companies to object, the applicant was invited to attend a road/rail negotiating panel meeting to see if agreement could be reached. If not the matter then went to a traffic court where both sides put their case which was then determined by the Licensing Authority.

As the legislation of 1933 put an end to steam road haulage these vehicles were phased out and by 1936 had all vanished, presumably they were scrapped because they were of no value. The road haulage side of the business was growing and to feed this growth the firm took over the tenancy in 1934 of a large warehouse on the north side of the Brayford Pool. This was part of the maltings complex and the building extended right through to Newland. This was ideal for storing grain for all the local millers. The rental was £100 per annum.

In June 1936 the business was incorporated into a new 'Limited' company and became 'Forman Brothers Ltd.' Prior to this all the steam road vehicles had been disposed of and at this time the fleet consisted of all the thrashing outfits, 2 Rover cars, 2 Morris Cowley cars, 10 Leyland lorries, 18 Bedford lorries (1 being articulated), 2 Commer Lorries, 6 Drawbar Trailers, plus all the machinery for all major repair and maintenance work. At this time the telephone number for the company was 276.

Some years previous to this my grandmother had moved out of the Stonefield family home and took up residence in a house named 'Mayfield' which had been built just a short distance away on Sleaford Road, and with William Watson, her eldest son, having moved into Stonefield with his family, the stage was set for further development and expansion of the business.

In 1936 a very large garage and workshop was built on site by a firm named A.J. Main of London. It consisted of a steel structure clad in asbestos and measured 120 ft. x 90 ft. which at that time was the largest width allowed without any central pillars to support it. The workmen who erected it completed the whole project without the use of any form of scaffolding. Anyone approaching the village on the B1188 road from the direction of Sleaford would gain the impression that the church was a massive building for the steeple appeared to be sitting on the end of the garage roof. Two dispensing slot machines were installed for the convenience of staff, one being for cigarettes which dispensed Woodbines, Park Drive and Players cigarettes, while the other machine dispensed chewing gum, one brand being Wrigleys but I cannot remember the other brand.

In 1937 an extension was added to the full 120ft length of the main building. This provided much needed additional service bays, workshops, stores, offices and so ensured that all maintenance, repair work, vehicle rebuilds and engine rebuilds could all be carried out on site. After 40 years thrashing, steam sawing and cultivating, all that side of the business was sold on 30th May 1937 in order to concentrate on developing and extending the road transport side of the business.

From 1937 to 1939 the vehicle fleet was more than doubled in size in spite of the 1933 Transport Act requiring proof of need before allowing expansion. It was found that the easiest method was to acquire the licences of existing licence holders, so this is what they did, acquiring the following;-

Wyberton (Hardwick) -Licence and goodwill.

Anwick (York) -Licence and premises.

Saxilby (Sergeants) -Licence and premises.

Owmbly - Licence.

Folkingham -Licence.

Birmingham - (Povey Tr Smethwick) -Purchase July 1937 - Closed 1938
- Not successful.

The depot in London opened in September 1937 when a lease was taken out on 10-16 Cole Street, in the parish of St. Mary, Newington, in the district of Southwark at a rental of £225 per annum. Several company vehicles were located there and local staff employed as drivers. Goods for delivery to the south of the country would be taken down and deposited at the depot and from there they would be taken to their final destination by the depot staff. Conversely goods to be transported from the south to the north would be collected from the customer and brought to the depot by depot staff and then brought back to the north on the first vehicle's return trip. This was a very good system for the movement of goods even though it was a two day journey getting there and back in those days. Not surprising really for the speed limits were 30 mph for vehicles up to 3 ton u.w. and 20 mph for vehicles over 3 ton u.w. Overnight accommodation was located near to the depot.

(Welcome to Harold Woodcock who joined the company at 16 years of age as a drive's mate then when old enough became a driver. He remembers the London depot very well).

In three years the company had amassed a fleet of 63 vehicles and had their own livery which consisted of a green boiler suit with the company name embroidered on the breast pocket, in addition to which the drivers had 3 coats, 2 of which were black, one being short and one being long, and also a summer coat which was a cream colour with a red collar on which was the company name in red. Finally each driver also had a black peaked cap which had a chrome logo attached.

For recreation the company had a football team made up of employees and they played on a football pitch up Hall lane opposite the house known as 'The Graffoe'. There was also a Tug o' War team in which the anchor man was George Bowers, affectionately known as 'Pasty' Bowers. Finally there was a table tennis table located in an upstairs room above the office for the use of staff during their lunch breaks.

The next generation of the family, William Watson Jnr's two sons William and Frank, my cousins, had by this time duly left school and by now were working for the company. Both of them went on to see service in World War 11. As can be imagined the war years from 1939 to 1945 were a very difficult period as eligible men were called up to serve King and Country. To help to repair that loss lady drivers were employed, one of whom lives just a stone's throw away, Nancy Westwood.

The licensing system was suspended and from time to time the company would write to the War Office to ascertain if men could be released from service to ease the problem and to help out, particularly in the sugar beet season. New vehicles were unobtainable and spare parts were almost non-existent. Whatever was required a written request had to be sent to the War Office for approval or otherwise. On top of all that, a number of vehicles were on Requisition Notice which meant they could be taken away for military use at a minutes

notice. In addition the company was heavily involved in the movement of munitions to various parts of the country for the war effort. All vehicles used for such work had to have a white line painted down the side. Of all the vehicles in the fleet only one was on hire purchase and that was Number 88. It was purchased in this manner because being a new vehicle it was likely to be the subject of a Requisition Notice issued by the War office, and if taken for military use it was hoped that the government would then be responsible for the H.P. payments. However it was never taken.

With the introduction of fuel rationing the company was made responsible for the distribution of fuel coupons to all firms in the area, including those such as Lincolnshire Road car. Eventually the War Office took over the office staff recreation room and installed a civil servant named Mr Holditch from the War Office. Something of a mystery man for I never knew what he actually did, but I do not think he was concerned with the day to day running of the business, although he had a desk and a huge map of the country on the wall. Prior to the blitz on London the depot there was closed down after being in operation up to the end of 1940.

The company always had a very loyal and hardworking workforce and they remained with the company for long periods of time. At the end of hostilities in 1945 the men who had been called away for military service returned and took up their former jobs with the company. Over a period of several years the company employed six members of the Woodcock family and three from the Bannister family, all from Potterhanworth. It was the policy of the company that if any employee, due to the manner of his driving, i.e. speeding, driving in the wrong direction along a one-way street etc. incurred a fine for a breach of road traffic laws, the offending driver had to pay the fine. However if the breach of the law was not due to the driver's actions, i.e. an insecure load etc., then the company would always pay the fine.

The end of the war saw a general election and a change of government and transport became a political pawn resulting in the passing of the 1947 Transport Act and that same year road and rail transport was nationalised. Prior to this happening and thinking that it would be the end of free enterprise the company put in a bid for Mr Branston's Springfield Farm which was up for sale. It was understood that the offer had been accepted but then it was learned that another estate agent had become involved and the farm was sold to another family. However, it turned out that the Nationalisation Bill was not a carteblanche situation, for provided one could prove that 50% of your business in tonnage or cash was local, this being defined as within a 25 mile radius of your base, you would be exempt. Having proved this the company was never nationalised. Nevertheless severe restrictions were imposed on what could be carried outside the 25 mile radius. Typical of government departments the paperwork required was phenomenal. Fortunately a change of government came to our rescue and normal service was resumed.

As the youngest male person of the family I was the last to join the workforce of the company, this taking place in 1948 and was later

followed by my conscription for National Service which I served from 1950/52, after which I returned to my previous work. The company peaked in the early fifties and at that time the strength of the fleet was around 75 vehicles, some 40 of these being Bedfords. In addition to our A.A. membership the company was a member of the Bedford Drivers' Club, and at that time we were the largest holder of 'A' Licenses in the East Midlands Traffic Area.

A lorry driver's lot was not an easy one with Lincolnshire being a large agricultural county, and this meant that the majority of the work involved the removal of loads of various products from the farmland and farm premises. Sugar beet was loaded manually from heaps in the field by the use of forks and very often removed by the same method at the sugar beet factory.

Potatoes were collected from a grave in the field, weighed up into 1 cwt. Sacks and loaded by hand.

The cereal crops came straight from the thrashing drum and were weighed in sacks as follows;

Peas and Beans - 19 Stone sack weight,

Wheat - 18 Stone sack weight,

Barley - 16 Stone sack weight,

Oats - 12 Stone sack weight,

Flour - 10 Stone sack weight.

All sacks had to be manually loaded onto the vehicle.

The first question to be asked of any of any applicant seeking employment as a driver was 'Can you carry 18 stone on your back?' The mid and late 1950s were a particularly difficult time for the company when firstly we were devastated by the deaths of Harold, my father, who died in 1955, followed by the death of his brother William Watson in 1956, then the death of the company secretary in 1957, and finally the death of Harold and William's mother (my grandmother) in 1958. This was a period of profound sadness from which the company never fully recovered.

From being employees, William, Frank, and I became employers. From 1955 to 1985, the thirty years that we ran the business the transport industry went through more changes than in the previous seventy years, both in legislation and the way in which goods were packaged and carried; Potatoes were collected from temperature controlled stores, no longer in sacks, but carried in large bulk containers.

Flour also changed from sacks to bulk and was transported in large specialised and at first complicated vehicles. (We were into the third generation of this type of vehicle).

Grain harvesting was done in the field and stored in large buildings and transported in bulk in tipping vehicles.

Any bagged traffic came down to nothing more than 1 cwt. sacks and much of this was placed on pallets, loaded and off loaded by fork lift.

On the operating side we had to contend with the introduction of the H.G.V. driving licence so any applicants for driving positions who did not possess one had to be trained. The annual testing of heavy goods vehicles was another thing we had to face. The testing station for these was at Spitalgate, near Grantham, and every Monday

throughout the year we attended with a vehicle or trailer or both for testing, all of which had to be booked three months in advance.

In an endeavour to keep abreast of all these changes we cut the number of vehicles we operated, but maintained the tonnage carried by changing over to larger articulated vehicles. Legislation in the late 1970s did away with the A-B-C Carriers Licenses and these were replaced with Operators Licenses which dramatically reduced the value of the business as these licenses were readily and easily obtained. Lastly to take advantage of the increase in G.V.W. to 42 tons we were in the process of converting to multi - axle operation, doing it ourselves in the workshops.

However, the end was nigh, my colleagues had attained the age of retirement and wanted to take life more leisurely, so the decision was made to sell up, and the subsequent sale took place on the 18th December 1985. Strangely enough, that same day, Linda Chalker M.P. opened the Lincoln by-pass.

I am only the second male member of the family to enjoy retirement.

Gerald Forman 2012